

New Age

Is Isotek's Aquarius the dawning of a new era in mains conditioning? Paul Rigby finds out...



I've always been suspicious of gadgets and liquids and sprays and boxes which don't appear to do anything but light up in various shades of blue.

However, despite my inherent mistrust and concomitant grumpiness I do pride myself with having an open mind. The result, after testing, has been a reviewer in a constant state of surprise. Yes, cables *do* improve sonics, demagnetising your vinyl and CDs *does* make a difference, correct shelving *does* enhance sound quality, and leggy blondes can put a smile on your face [steady on Paul! Ed.]...

So it was with this growing sense of assurance (although I may have dreamt about the last one), that I tackled Isotek's new mains conditioner, the Aquarius, the official successor to the company's own popular Mini Sub, originally released in 2003.

So what does a mains conditioner actually do? Basically, it gives your electricity supply a wash and brush up, filtering out any spikes, removing noise and preventing any sort of contamination either directly from the mains or from one component to the other (utilising, in IsoTek's case, Kirchoff's Equal Path of Resistance technology). If you believe in that old adage, 'rubbish in, rubbish out', often applied to sources such as turntables and CDs, then look at your mains electricity as the real source of your hi-fi. Once distorting noise enters your system from the mains then your hi-fi is up against it from the off.

The new Aquarius arrives with six sockets, two 16 Amp, high current

outlets for power amps and the like, plus four 5 Amp, medium current outlets for CD players, tuners, *et al.* Each socket is isolated from each other and features its own filtering system. The medium current sockets also feature Adaptive Gating that changes the degree of filtering dependent on the load. Other enhancements include a new choke design with improved filter stages and updated magnetic materials plus the outer aluminium case (measuring 444x85x305mm and weighing in at 9kg) which, in effect, acts as a Faraday Cage providing enhanced shielding.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening tests took place with an Isotek-supplied Extreme cable that plugged the Aquarius into the mains plus two IsoTek Optimum cables (£190 each) to attach my power amp monoblocks to the high-current sockets and two IsoTek Elite cables (£125 each) attached to the medium-current sockets to plug in my other system components.

I initially span the Jeff Beck reissue 'Blow By Blow' (see classic cuts, p115) on vinyl, and jazzman Brad Mehldau's new 'Highway Rider' (Nonesuch) CD. My initial impression was that a sense of calm suddenly reigned over the whole performance. There was extra focus to the stereo image while extended listening alerted me to new details and information that emerged from both mixes. Bass remained tight but more relaxed, lower frequencies seemed to have to make less of an effort to be heard.

Probably the most notable effect

of the Aquarius was heard on the Nancy Wilson LP, 'Who Can I Turn To' (Capitol). Whenever Wilson extended a note by utilising her vibrato, the Aquarius was able to more easily follow the voice as it moved up and down the frequencies during the vibrato sequence and do it more effectively than the older Mini Sub I had on hand for reference, too. The greater clarity and enhanced, quiet background of the Aquarius allowed the voice to be properly tracked for the first time. Without the Aquarius, an upper midrange bloom tended to mask the vibrato at source.

CONCLUSION

Don't view the Aquarius as a method of solving problems in your current system set-up, but see it as a way of enhancing what's already there. I regard the IsoTek as another step in helping to remove what I consider to be the most critical obstruction to good music in any hi-fi – distortion and its associated noisy cousins. Purifying the musical signal, via improving speaker design, better cables, demagnetising your LPs and CDs, lifting your turntable to an isolating platform or buying a mains conditioner, not only allows your components to really show what they're capable of, but also enhances the appreciation of the music you're playing. That the IsoTek Aquarius revealed previously unheard details from my familiar LPs, says it all.



VERDICT

An effective improvement to a good hi-fi system, this serious product justifies its premium price.

FOR

- clarity
- midrange detail
- bass control

AGAINST

- nothing at the price